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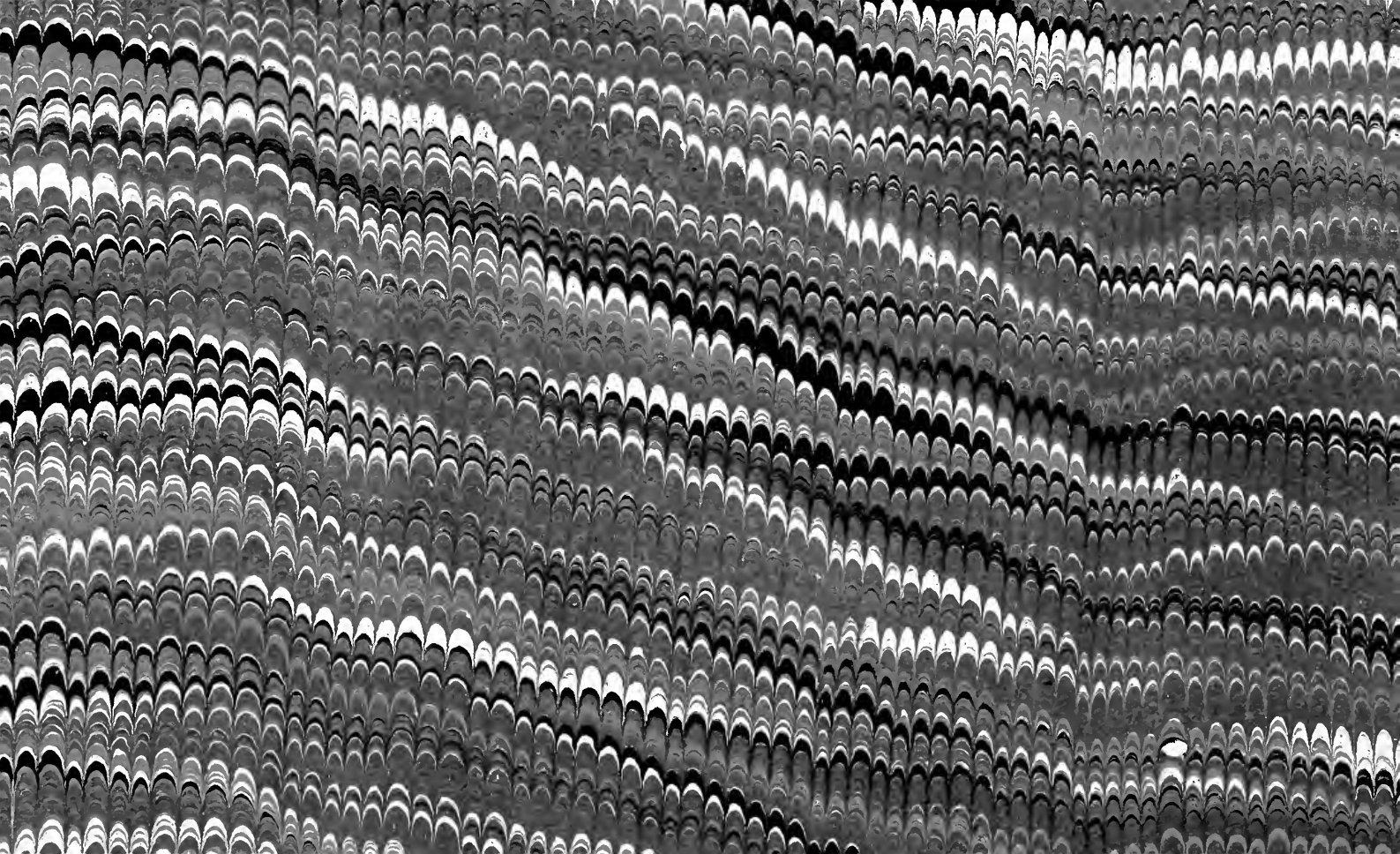

REMARKS

ON

TABASCO, MEXICO,

OCCASIONED BY

THE REPORTED DISCOVERY OF REMAINS OF ANCIENT CITIES BEING FOUND IN THAT LOCALITY.

A PAPER READ BEFORE

"The Numismatic and Antiquarian Society of Philadelphia,"

THURSDAY EVENING, APRIL 5, 1866,

BY

CHARLES H. HART,

CORRESPONDING SECRETARY.

PHILADELPHIA:
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REMARKS ON TABASCO, MEXICO.

I HAVE no doubt but that other gentlemen present, as well as myself, noticed in the daily papers about two weeks since, the following paragraph: "Ancient Cities Discovered. The Department of State, has received dispatches from our Consul at Tabasco, Mexico, dated January 3, 1866, in which he communicated the discovery of the ruins of two ancient cities, which have remained unknown since the days of the Conquest. The first, he says, from its topography and situation, he is led to believe is one occupied by Cortez, at the time of his invasion of Tabasco, and is situated about fifteen miles to the west of Frontera, a town at the mouth of Tabasco or Grijalva river; the other is situated in the north-eastern portion of the State, nearly opposite the present city of Laguna de los Terminos, and was known before the Conquest as Xicolanea. The traditions connected with it trace its origin to a period at least two hundred years before the Christian era."

Having a desire to learn more of these interesting archæological remains for the purpose of laying it before the Society, I addressed the Honorable Secretary of State, soliciting a copy of the original dispatch, and speedily received a very complimentary letter in reply, enclosing the desired information. I now read it from the official copy.

UNITED STATES COMMERCIAL AGENCY,
Tabasco, January 3, 1866.

SIR:

* * * I have to inform the Department, that in my explorations in this State, I have discovered the ruins of two ancient cities, which have remained unnoticed and unknown since the days of the Conquest. The first from its situation and the topography of the surrounding country, I am led to believe is the same that Cortez occupied at the time of his invasion of

Tabasco. The edifices, though in complete ruins, afford proof and incontestible evidence of the vastness and grandeur of the ancient capitol of Tabasco, which before the Conquest was called Ceutla, and is situated about fifteen miles to the west of Frontera, a town at the mouth of the Tabasco or Grijalva river. The other is situated in the north-eastern part of the State, nearly opposite the present city of Laguna de los Terminos, and was known before the Conquest as Xicolanca, and the traditions connected with it, trace its origin to a period at least two hundred years before the Christian era.

I regretted that the condition of my health was such as to prevent me from prosecuting investigations which might have contributed something illustrative of the history of the ancient civilized nations of Mexico. However, the result of my obser vations will be given to the world in a work which I design publishing during the coming year,* on Mexico. I may add that the present sites of these cities are the pictures of desolation, and can with truth be called "howling wildernesses."

The vast district of country lying between Gautemala and Mexico, in the vicinity of the great lake of Pelew-Itsa, has never been explored, and now that peace has again blessed our country, we might cause the whole to be explored, together with the sources of Usumasinta, which here are as great a mystery as the sources of the Nile.

I remain sir, very respectfully your obedient servant,

B. W. Sanders.

To Hon. Wm. H. Seward,
Washington City.

In acknowledging the receipt of the above document, I inquired for the postal address of Mr. Sanders, intending to correspond with him on the subject, but was informed "that he had ceased to be connected with the Department, and that of his present whereabouts it was not informed." Thinking it might be of interest to the Society to hear something, but little it is true, of the locality of these remains and the events happening there at the time of the Conquest, I have drawn the following account from the old chroniclers.

Juan de Grijalva, who has the glory of being the first navigator to set foot on Mexican soil, sailed from St. Jago de Cuba, on the fifth of April, 1518, according to Bernal Diaz, although by Herrera and De Solis, it was three days later, and Prescott,

who gleans it from a MSS. copy of the "Itinerary" of the commander's chaplain, says it was on the first of the succeeding May, in command of a squadron of four vessels fitted out by Don Diego Velasquez, Governor of the Island, for the purpose of further exploring those countries upon which, the adventurer Cordova had been driven in a heavy storm, and which he reported to be a land "where the houses were built of lime and stone and the inhabitants decently clad; that they showed maize, and possessed gold."

After having been absent a little more than a month, taking Diaz, who was of the expedition for my guide, they entered the river Tabasco, which was then christened the Grijalva in honor of their captain, and held an amicable conference with a chief, who presented Grijalva "with divers curiosities of more workmanship than value," says De Solis, "and plumes of various colors, robes of fine cotton, with some figures of animals to adorn them, made of gold, thin and light, or curiously wrought in wood, set in gold or overlaid with it." Antonio de Herrera, and others who follow him, affirms that the Cazique presented Grijalva with a suit of armor of fine gold with all the pieces belonging to it; that he armed himself completely with them, and that they fitted him as well as if they had been made for him.

Grijalva having visited various other parts of this new found land, and thinking himself successful beyond his most sanguine expectations, returned to Cuba after an absence of nearly six months, when he was surprised to find that another and much larger armament was being fitted out to follow up his own discoveries, accounts of which had been received from Alvarado, who was dispatched with advices to the Governor.

This second expedition was placed under the command of Hernando Cortez, a Hidalgo, native of Medellin in Estremadura, born according to the most trustworthy sources in the year 1485, although Orellana says "that Cortez came into the world the same day that that *infernal beast, the false heretic Luther* entered it," which was two years earlier than I have given. He was consequently in his thirty-fourth year when

this important commission was placed in his hands, and parting with all his property, the better to provide for the fleet, he went rapidly to work, in order to fit out his squadron with the least possible delay, and set sail from St. Jago in the still of the night of the 18th November, 1518; directed his course to Trinidad and other towns on the Island, for the purpose of recruiting volunteers for his ships, and finally on the eighteenth day of February, 1519, he weighed anchor and made for the coast of Yucatan. Stopping on the way at Cozumel, he arrived on the thirteenth of March at the mouth of the Tabasco or Grijalva river, and the large ships not being able to pass the bar, came to anchor.

The Spaniards were at once struck with the appearance of boats filled with Indians, some armed, and all much superior in aspect to those of the Islands. Leaving a sufficient force to guard the ships, Cortez embarked the rest in brigatines and small boats with several pieces of artillery, and rowed up the river against a strong current. When he had proceeded a little more than half a league, he discovered a large town "with houses built of sun-dried bricks, and covered with thatched roofs." It was surrounded by a wall of timber, of great strength and provided with loopholes, through which arrows, stones and darts were discharged in time of war. "The compass," says De Solis, "was round, without any traverses or other defences, and at the closing of the circle, the extremity of one line covered the other, and formed a narrow winding street, in which were two or three little castles of wood, which filled up the passage, and wherein they were used to post their sentinels; a sufficient fortress against the arms of this new world, where they were happily ignorant of the arts of war, and of those methods to attack and defend in which mankind have been instructed, either by malice or necessity."

Accosting some of the canoes through the interpreter Aguilar, Cortez requested leave to land for supplies of fresh water and provisions, of which they were in want, and would pay well. The boatmen promised to take a message to the town and bring an answer. They went, and soon returned bringing five

or six boats "filled with bread, and a few turkeys," which they told the Spaniards to accept as a gift. Cortez replied that these were entirely inadequate to their wants, on account of the number of persons in the large ships below, which they had not seen, and he begged they would send word to allow him to enter the town and obtain his supplies. The Indians asked one night to consider his request, and retired to the town, while Cortez went to a small island in the river, where he waited till morning for their answer.

Both parties practiced some deception, the Indians wanting the time to carry their effects and women and children away to the mountains, and to rally their warriors, while Cortez sent for the remainder of his force which had been left in the vessels, to come up to the island, and caused a search to be made in the river for a fording place. Neither side was aware of the action of the other. The men came up from the ships, and a ford was found within less than half a mile above, where the water was only two or three feet deep; they also discovered a thicket of trees, under shelter of which they could approach very near the town without being seen. Cortez, on obtaining this information, immediately directed his officers, Alonzo de Avila and Pedro de Alvarado, with each one hundred men, to occupy the woods the same night, so as to be in readiness, on hearing a signal, to attack the town on the land side in the morning. This place where Avila landed, is called by Diaz "Palmares," and approached Tabasco by a very narrow road. As soon as it was day, eight canoes, crowded with armed men, more numerous than before, came to the island, bringing a very small quantity of provisions, saying that they could not fetch more as the inhabitants had all fled from fear, and they therefore begged that the Spaniards would take this supply and return to sea, and not disturb the peace of the country. The interpreter answered that it was shameful to leave them to perish with hunger, and that they would soon repent it. They replied that they knew them not, and as they had a "frightful" appearance, they feared to admit them to their houses, and if they wanted water they could take it out of the river or

dig wells as they had to do. Cortez then said that he could by no means depart without entering the place and seeing the country, for the purpose of giving an account of it to the greatest lord of the world, who had sent him there, and that they might give him a favorable reception or not, as they pleased, for he would commend himself to the power of God and his own strength.

The natives retorted that he had better go away and not boast in other people's country, and that as to entering the town, they would never permit it, and if attempted, would destroy them all. Cortez still persisted in his endeavors to obtain a friendly reception, but finding it in vain, gave the signal for the attack on the land, and he himself at the head of two hundred men, approached in boats near the town, when he discharged his ordnance and then leaped into the water to the knees and began the assault on the walls. The Indians fought with desperation, wounding several of their opponents with their arrows and darts; and although terrified at the strange noise of the fire-arms, made a courageous resistance, and fled not from the defences. But the land force coming upon them unawares, entered on the side where it was undefended; the Indians seeing this left the river front to defend the other part of the town, and in the meantime Cortez entered, partially barefooted, having left one of his buskins in the mud, and drove the savages before him "up the street to a second barricade, behind which they posted themselves, fronting us (the Spaniards) valiantly, whistling and shouting 'al calcachioni,' or 'kill the captain.'" Bernal Diaz continues, "We now drove the enemy before us, though they fought manfully and never could be made to turn their backs, until they arrived at a great enclosed court, where were some large apartments and halls, and three houses containing idols. Here they collected all their effects, but as they were forced to evacuate this last post, our general ordered a halt, and that they should be pursued no farther." The soldiers searched the place, but found nothing but Indian corn, turkeys, some articles of cotton and a few grains of gold, and Cortez took up his quarters

in the temples, which were spacious enough to contain all his followers. This was the first city taken by force of arms in the course of the expedition.

Peter Martyr, in the De Insulis, gives a glowing picture of this Indian capital, the particulars of which he received from the old pilot Alaminos, and from two of the officers of Cortez, who revisited Spain in the course of that year. He says: "Ad fluminis ripam protentum dicunt esse oppidum, quantum non ausim dicere: mille quingentorum passuum, ait Alaminus nauclerus, et domorum quinque ac viginti millium: stringunt alij, ingens tamen fatentur et celebre. Hortis intersecantur domus, quæ sunt *egregiè lapidibus et calce fabrefactæ, maximâ industriâ et architectorum arte.*"

The following morning Cortez sent out a detachment under Alvarado, and another under Francisco de Lugo, to reconnoiter. The latter officer had not advanced a league before he learned the position of the natives, by their attacking him in such force that he was fain to take shelter in a large "stone building," where he was closely beseiged, but the first party coming up, drove the beseigers off, and the combined forces returned to the main body. Cortez learning from a prisoner who had been taken that a large body of Indians were encamped on a level ground a few miles distant from the city, called the plain of Ceutla, determined to attack them the next day, which was Lady-day, the twenty-fifth of March. The horses were ordered to be landed from the ships, and were assigned to the most accomplished horsemen and bravest soldiers, twelve in number, whose names are all indelibly recorded on the pages of Diaz, who further says, Cortez presented each one with a breastplate decorated with bells.

All the necessary dispositions being made the little army heard mass, and then sallied forth for the conflict, the cavalry making a lengthy circuit in order to avoid some marshy ground. The troops advanced more than a league without descrying the enemy, until at length they beheld their dusky lines stretching as far as the eye could reach, along the edge of the horizon. The Indians had shown some sagacity in the choice of their

position, and as the weary Spaniards came slowly on, encumbered with their heavy mail, the Tabascians sent up their hideous yells and discharged volleys of arrows, stones and other missiles, which rattled like hail on the shields and helmets of the assailants. Many were wounded before they could gain the firm ground, where they soon cleared a space for themselves, and opened a heavy fire of artillery and musketry on the dense masses of the enemy. Numbers were swept down at every discharge, but the bold barbarians far from being dismayed, threw up dust and leaves to hide their losses, and sounding their war instruments, shot off fresh flights of arrows in return. The Spaniards began to fear they had underated their opponents to too great a degree, and were just on the verge of retiring, when the most distant column of the enemy was seen to be agitated and thrown into disorder, and a few moments later they heard the welcome shouts of "San Jago and San Pedro." The horse had arrived. The savages, terrified at the mountainous apparition of horse and rider, thinking them one and the same, were seized with a panic and fled, leaving the field and victory to the invaders. Many prisoners were taken, among whom were two chiefs or caziques, whom Cortez treated with marked kindness, in order to win them to him.

The captured natives were much struck by the neighing of the horses, and imagining they spoke, inquired of the conquerors what they said, who replied that they were offended on account of their having fought against them. The simple Indians thereupon asked the horses their pardon, and gave them "roses and turkey bones" to eat. De Solis gives the following minute account of the weapons used by the natives in this action, which I think well worth transcribing. "Most of them wear bows and arrows; the bow strings were made of the sinews of beasts or of thongs of deer skins twisted, and their arrows for want of iron were headed with stones ground sharp, or fish bones. They used also a kind of dart which sometimes they threw, and at others they managed like a pike, as occasion required. They had likewise long swords which they used with both hands, as we do our broadswords, made

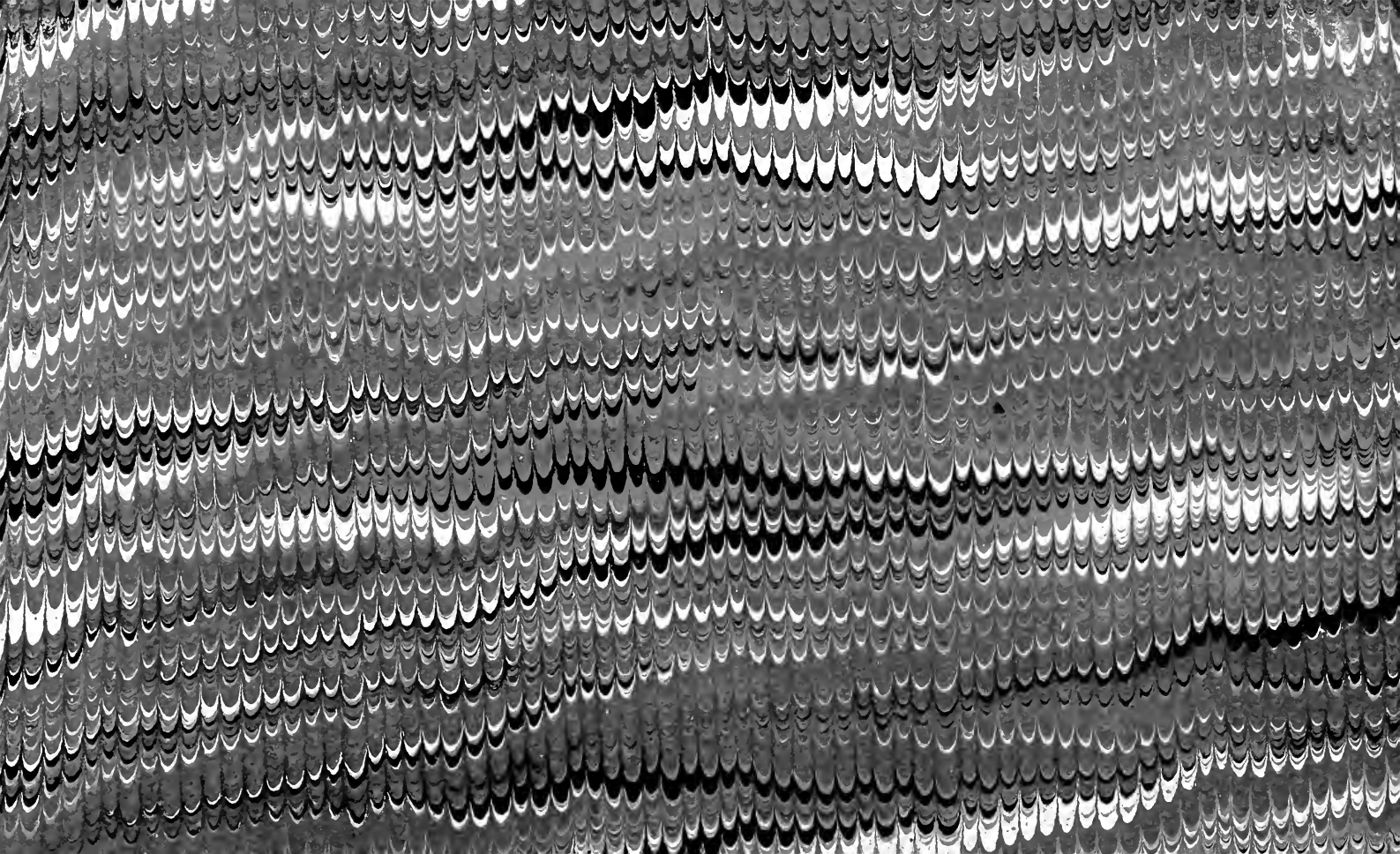
of wood, in which they fixed sharp flints. The strongest of them had clubs, pointed with flints, and there were slingers who threw stones with great force and skill. The defensive arms, which were only used by commanders and persons of distinction, were quiltings of cotton awkwardly applied before the breast, fitted breast-plates, and shields of wood or tortoise shell adorned with plates of such metal as they could get, some making use of gold as we do iron. They had also music with which they animated their soldiers and gave signals, as flutes made of great canes, sea shells; and a sort of drum made of the trunk of a tree, so hollowed and made thin that they answered to the stroke of the stick a very displeasing sound."

The two captured chiefs after being presented with numerous trinkets, were persuaded to return to their friends and exhort them to come into amicable terms. This mission they executed very faithfully, the result of which was that the next day the chiefs of the province sent "fifteen slaves" with their faces besmeared with black and wretchedly clad, in sign of contrition for what had passed. The day following this, thirty Indians of rank in habiliments of state, came bearing presents and to ask permission to bury their dead, "for fear that they would be eaten by the lions and tigers." This being granted them, they proceeded "to burn and inter" the bodies. They also informed Cortez that on the succeeding day he would receive an embassy to treat conclusively of peace. Accordingly at the time mentioned, ten native dignitaries, richly dressed, arrived with much ceremony. They approached with very great submission, and having perfumed him with their vessels of incense, in which were burned according to De Solis, gum anime, gum copal and other sweet scents, a very usual ceremony, when they would express the greatest veneration, they delivered their embassy, praying pardon for their past conduct, and declaring their good intentions for the future. These embassadors were followed by a long train of servants, including the celebrated slave Marina, so baptized by the Spaniards, who finally became the friend and interpreter of Cortez. The next day an altar was built and a crucifix erected, when the town of

Tabasco changed its name to that of *Santa Maria de la Vitoria*, and the following morning being Palm Sunday, after hearing mass, the entire army re-embarked and set sail for St. Juan de Uloa, where they arrived on Holy Thursday.

This, gentlemen, is a summary drawn from all the sources at my command of the doings and actions of the conquerors and the conquered, at the place which has just been brought to our notice by the vigilance of Mr. Sanders, from whom I trust you may all hear soon a much better and more satisfactory account by means of the work he promises in the foregoing letter.

NOTE.—Tabasco is a south-east state of Mexico, extending from latitude 17° to 18° 40′ N., longitude 91° 20′ to 94° 40′ W., and is bounded on the north by the Gulf of Mexico, on the east by Yucatan, on the south by Chiapas and Guatemala, and on the west by the territory of Tehuantepec; it has an area of 15,609 square miles, and a population of about 75,000, chiefly Indians.



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